

PHEASANTS IN THE STORM

*Story by Craig Bihrlé
Photos by Bob Splichal*



The 2008 early November storm was one of the worst to ever hit at least part of the state just prior to the deer gun opener. It's likely that only a few people, like these hunters near Mott, were lucky enough to experience hunting in such a weather event.



Looking down and squinting to protect his eyes from snowflakes flying at 40 miles per hour, Gary Splichal brings in a well-earned rooster.

It didn't take Bob Splichal long to understand that November 6, 2008, would assume a treasured place in his book of most memorable pheasant hunts.

And he didn't even shoot a bird.

He did, however, shoot dozens of photographs on a wild and stormy day before the regular deer season opener, at a time when thousands of other hunters were either begrudgingly postponing opening weekend plans, or cautiously starting out for traditional hunting grounds, knowing several hours of white-knuckle driving loomed ahead.

Splichal might have been in this position as well, had he not – with no small amount of disappointment – had to postpone his annual October pheasant hunting trip to Mott, North Dakota from his home in Wahpeton. As it was, Splichal, his brother Gary from Grand Forks and friend Chet Leverson from Fargo started the 350-mile trip a couple of days early, to make up for the scratched earlier pheasant hunt with a couple of days chasing pheasants before the November 7 deer opener.

They arrived at their destination as weather forecasters were predicting a major winter storm that would begin with rain across much of North Dakota on Wednesday the 5th, and then change to snow from southwest to northeast. The Mott area received more than an inch of rain on the 5th, then it started snowing.

By the time the snow stopped, more than a foot covered the ground, but not in a nice even layer. Winds

that gusted to more than 40 miles per hour heaped the snow into formidable drifts that blocked secondary roads and forced freeway closures.

But Splichal and his partners were already comfortably lodged at a

friend's house near Mott, so they just walked out the door that Thursday morning and went hunting. "You could hardly see anything," Splichal recalled. "It didn't take us very long to realize that we weren't going to be doing *much* hunting."

But by sundown on November 6, the Splichal crew had ventured out and returned to the farm

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house three separate times. "There would be periods when the wind was not gusting as much and you could see pretty well," Splichal said, "but when the gusts came up it was a white-out."

When the gusts died for a short time and visibility improved, the scene wasn't always pretty. While they saw many pheasants tucked into protective cover, they also saw birds that had fallen victim to the storm. One rooster they encountered was sitting out in the open, its head caked in frozen snow.

Thinking the bird was dead, one of the group picked it up and discovered it was still alive. After

they shook off the ice, the bird was able to fly away, and Splichal wondered if it would make it until the next morning.

"It didn't take me very long to realize that I was in a setting that I'd never been in before, and may not ever again be repeated," Splichal, a nurse anesthetist and part-time photographer noted. "... I find it as much fun to carry my camera and photograph the wildlife and hunters, as it is for me to carry my gun. That day was really a chance for me to do just that. I'm sure I didn't fire my gun all day."

The others in the group didn't shoot much either,



but that didn't seem to matter. "It definitely was one of those unique experiences that we will always remember," Splichal stated. "We were kind of lucky to be staying where we were right in the middle of it."

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The novelty of hunting in a blizzard didn't last long for this hunter, who was anxious to get back to a warm vehicle after a short walk.



Even with cover nearby, this bird chose to ride out the storm in the open, and quickly became caked in snow and ice. It would have died in place had not the Splichal group found it still alive and removed the ice from around its head and feet so it could fly off.